



Blog: Student Learning Standards

Overview

Learning standards define the knowledge and skills students should aim to have at any given time within an educational program. They provide goals and benchmarks that inform curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Common Core State Standards and Next Generation Science Standards are two well-known examples, and many state-level standards are based on them. This blog post offers discussion and resources intended to support the development of culture and language standards for emerging language immersion schools. If your school has the autonomy to define standards, this information provides examples suitable for elementary programs.

Start With the End in Mind

As you begin to define language and culture standards, work with your leadership team to discuss the knowledge and skills necessary for your school's concluding grade level. For instance, if your school will stop serving students in fifth grade, then start with the cultural competencies and language skills a proficient fifth-grade student should have to transition out of your school. While you may open with only the lower grade levels and build up from there, start defining standards with the ultimate goal in mind. If your community has a Native language program that serves higher grades or another geographic area, consider collaborating to align your standards so students can transition smoothly from one program to another.

When brainstorming the cultural competencies and language skills that paint a picture of a proficient student, consider the following:

- What language skills are necessary for a fluent speaker? And, which of these skills are most important and would be reasonable for a student at the conclusion of grade _____ (your school's final grade)?
- What vocabulary knowledge should students have at the conclusion of this grade?
- What cultural competencies are necessary to sustain the community's culture and traditions? And, which competencies are most important for students in this grade to master?

Connecting the End to the Beginning

Here, we will use the Navajo Nation Department of Diné Education's Navajo language and culture standards as examples of language skills, vocabulary knowledge, and cultural competencies that may be represented in upper elementary grades (grades four through six).

Here are a few of [the Navajo Nation's upper elementary cultural standards](#):

- I will identify the basic structures and teaching of various hogans.
- I will classify the Land and Water Beings in my environment.
- I will recognize the edible plants in my environment.
- I will identify the usage of herbs.

Once you've determined the end goal for students, use this vision to determine appropriate, scaffolded cultural competencies that will inform student proficiency. At this point, you and your

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team can go back to the grade where students start and ask yourselves what students need to know and be able to do to develop proficiency over time. For instance, to identify the usage of herbs by grade five, students will likely need to develop proficiency in naming and identifying the herbs, and then in describing similarities and differences between herbs. In the Diné Culture Standards, "I will name the herbs within my surroundings" is a [lower elementary standard](#) that scaffolds students towards the later standard of "I will identify the usage of herbs."

Here are a few of [the Navajo Nation's upper elementary language standards](#):

- I will give oral directions to my peers.
- I will use verb modes appropriately to describe what I am doing.
- I will hold simple conversation with my peers.
- I will converse with more complex sentences.

Engage in the same scaffolding process to help students work toward the language skills you want them to master. Remember, this is when your team should discuss what students need to be able to do first to support these later demonstrations of proficiency. In the Diné Culture Standards, "I will answer simple questions about myself" is the [lower elementary standard](#) that scaffolds students toward the later standard of "I will hold simple conversations with my peers." Similarly, "I will speak in one word or simple sentences, i.e., noun + verb word order" is the lower elementary standard that scaffolds students towards the later standard of "I will converse with more complex sentences."

A Tip for Writing Standards

As you develop learning standards, make the statements specific and actionable. For instance, in the Navajo Nation examples above, identifying, classifying, recognizing, and conversing demonstrate proficiency at the specified levels. Bloom's Taxonomy is a research-based tool that can support you in choosing appropriate action words for your standards. To learn more about using Bloom's Taxonomy, visit The University of Arkansas's TIPS article "[Using Bloom's Taxonomy to Write Effective Learning Outcomes](#)."

Conclusion

The resources and ideas in this article focus on culture and language standards, and you can use the same process to create standards for other content areas. For schools that need to work within existing state standards, consider how you can incorporate significant cultural understandings into those curriculum, assessment, and proficiency systems. To learn more about how others across Indian Country embed cultural relevancy into their systems and procedures, we invite you to explore more of our Summer Series resources.

For more on creating an immersion school, including topics such as curriculum development and language proficiency and assessment, review resources posted on the Native American Language Resource Center (NALRC) [program page](#) and join the Office of Indian Education for the [NALRC Summer Series webinars](#).



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Resources

[Diné Content Standards – Navajo Nation](#)

[Using Bloom's Taxonomy to Write Effective Learning Outcomes, The University of Arkansas](#)